

**EXPEDITED HANDLING PROCEDURE**

**PURSUANT TO 37 C.F.R. § 1.116**

Application No. 09/544,349

**Amendments to the Claims:**

This listing of claims will replace all prior versions, and listings, of claims in the application:

**Listing of Claims:**

1. (currently amended) A method of preparing a snack product from a cooked cereal dough, comprising the steps of:
  - A. providing free cereal grain pieces having a particle size of about 0.5 to 2.5 mm and a moisture content of at least 18%;
  - B. cooking and forming the grain pieces into a cooked cereal dough in a cooker extruder in a first cooking step at a temperature sufficient to gelatinize cereal starch in the grain pieces to provide an at least partially cooked cereal ~~mass~~ or dough having discernible grain bits from the free cereal grain pieces of step A, said forming step including adding sufficient amounts of moisture to provide the cooked cereal dough with a moisture content of about 21 to 35%; and
  - C. immediately thereafter, subjecting the cooked cereal dough to a second cooking step at a temperature of about 120 to about 194°C (248 to 380°F) for about 15 to 45 minutes to form an extended time cooked cereal dough having said discernible grain bits dispersed therein.
2. (previously presented) The method of claim 1 additionally comprising the steps of:  
forming the cooked cereal dough into pellets each weighing about 0.25 to 10g;  
and drying the pellets to a moisture content of about 8% to 14%.
3. (previously presented) The method of claim 2 additionally comprising the step of:  
rapidly heating the pellets to provide puffed finished grain based snacks.

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4. (original) The method of claim 1 wherein step A comprises the substeps of:

- 1) preparing a raw cereal premix comprising at least one grain ingredient selected from the group consisting of wheat, corn (maize), oats, rye, triticale and mixtures thereof;
- 2) admixing sufficient amounts of water and/or hot moisture containing ingredients to provide a wetted preblend with a moisture content of at least 18%, and
- 3) steeping the wetted preblend until the added moisture is absorbed.

5. (original) The method of claim 1 wherein the cereal grain includes corn (maize).

6. (previously presented) The method of claim 1 wherein steps B and C are practiced to provide the dough with a Specific Mechanical Energy ("SME") value of less than 35 watt-hours/kg of dough.

7. (previously presented) The method of claim 3 wherein the rapid heating includes deep fat frying to provide fried puffed grain based snacks having a fat content of about 15 to 40% by weight.

8. (original) The method of claim 6 wherein the cooked cereal dough includes sufficient amounts of nutritive carbohydrate ingredients to provide a total sugar content of about 1 to 15% (dry weight).

9. (canceled)

10. (original) The method of claim 6 wherein the dough includes a member selected from the group consisting of sugar(s), salt, minerals, vitamins, flavors, sodium bicarbonate, and mixtures thereof.

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11. (previously presented) The method of claim 4 wherein the steeping substep is performed with intermittent agitation.
12. (previously presented) The method of claim 11 additionally comprising the step of extruding the extended time cooked cereal dough into at least one dough rope extrudate.
13. (previously presented) The method of claim 12 wherein Step B is practiced in a twin screw extruder and has a duration of about 0.1 to 3 minutes.
14. (original) The method of claim 13 wherein step C is practiced in a cooker having an Archimedes screw operated at about 1-10 rpm for about 15 to 45 minutes.
15. (canceled)
16. (canceled)
17. (canceled)
18. (canceled)
19. (canceled)
20. (canceled)
21. (canceled)
22. (previously presented) The method of claim 3 wherein the finished puffed grain based snacks have a fat content of about 25% to 35%.

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23. (canceled)

24. (canceled)

25. (previously presented) The method of claim 3 additionally comprising the step of applying a topical seasoning to the puffed finished grain based snack.

26. (previously presented) The method of claim 25 wherein steps B and C are practiced to provide the dough with a Specific Mechanical Energy ("SME") value of about 10 to 25 watt-hours/kg of cooked dough.

27. (canceled)

28. (previously presented) The method of claim 3 wherein the rapid heating includes microwave heating.

29. (previously presented) The method of claim 3 wherein the rapid heating includes hot air puffing.

30. (previously presented) The method of claim 3 wherein the rapid heating includes deep fat frying.

31. (original) The method of claim 1 wherein step B is practiced in a twin screw extruder.

32. (canceled)

33. (canceled)

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34. (canceled)

35. (canceled)

36. (canceled)

37. (canceled)

38. (previously presented) The method of claim 1 additionally comprising the step of: sheeting the extended time cooked cereal dough to form a continuous cooled and tempered extended time cooked cereal dough sheet.

39. (canceled)

40. (canceled)

41. (previously presented) The method of claim 3 additionally comprising the step of applying a topical coating to the puffed finished grain based snacks.